

## ace of hearts

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## ace of hearts

by [meridies](#)

### Summary

On his eighteenth birthday, as crown prince of his kingdom, Dream is expected to attend three nights of a masquerade party, by the end of which he must choose his suitor. Little does he know that his best friend George is also attending the ball, but under a mask of his own.

### Notes

2nd day of prompts was "masquerade/mistaken identity" and as i already have one mistaken identity fic, i made myself write another!! also unbeta'd, so sorry if there are any mistakes <3

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

“How about her?”

“Uninteresting.”

“Him?”

“Uptight.”

“That one over there?”

“Obnoxious.”

“Do you think anyone will ever suit your needs?”

Dream lounged back in his chair, eyes on the bright, vivid colors of the crowd, and didn’t deign to respond to Sapnap’s comments. He may have been there, in theory, to look for a suitor, but Dream had no intention of doing that. He also had no intention of speaking with anyone besides Sapnap, who had practically been his brother since.

It was true, that he was of age, and it was true that if Dream wanted to truly keep the monarchy of the Northern Kingdom, he needed to marry someone equally wealthy and equally influential. But it was painfully apparent that everyone there was merely looking for status. It sounded cliché, but Dream wanted personality. Perhaps a bit of flair, too. Certainly not the girl approaching him then, waist drawn tightly back in a deep pink gown, smiling too brightly underneath her masquerade mask.

“Hello,” she said, in a lilting, sing-song voice, “May I have this dance?”

Dream glanced up and down, and it only took him a moment before he flicked his fingers dismissively. “No, you cannot. Goodbye.”

Distantly, he was aware of her crestfallen face, the way she clutched at her precious, lacy fan before turning and leaving with a false sense of confidence. He didn’t quite care much.

“That was harsh,” Sapnap said.

“She’s not interesting,” Dream said, “I can tell. I would dance with her for what, two minutes? Before the conversation gets dull and uninteresting, and I can barely manage to be polite anymore. It’s easier to simply be impolite in the first place.”

“I don’t think your parents will be particularly happy about how your chances of finding a suitor are going,” Sapnap mused.

Dream sighed. The worst part about the entirety of this situation was that there were still two more nights left of it— and by the end of those two nights, Dream was expected to have found an appropriate suitor by then. He couldn’t bear it.

“What about her?” Sapnap gave him a slight nudge and pointed to a girl standing at the edge of the dance floor, talking quietly with someone else, both of them in bejeweled gowns that probably weighed more than the girls themselves. Each had their hair pinned up in twisted curls, towering high over their heads.

“No,” Dream said, and didn’t bother elaborating.

“So fine,” Sapnap said, “You’re not looking for a girl. What about a guy?”

“If you find me someone interesting enough to give a second glance to, perhaps I’ll consider it.”

Sapnap sighed. “You’re unbearable.”

“This party is unbearable,” Dream muttered.

“Maybe you should give someone a chance,” Sapnap offered helpfully. “How much harm could it

do?"

*I don't even want to be here in the first place*, Dream wanted to say. Sapnap already knew that though; he was very much aware.

"I'll give someone a chance when I think they're interesting enough to deserve one," Dream said firmly, and refused to listen to any of Sapnap's sarcastic comments afterwards.

There was a lull in the conversation, and in that time, two separate people came up to ask for his hand to dance. Both times, Dream dismissed them without caring much. He was well-versed in the art of reading people, and he could tell when someone was genuinely interested in him, or whether they were merely talking to him for status or influence.

After five minutes of relative quiet, Sapnap said, "What about him?"

"Hm?"

Sapnap, with one white gloved hand, pointed towards someone standing on the edges of the crowd, suit black and mask blue. The dark-haired man wasn't interacting with many people, only giving the slightest nods to people who passed by, and busied himself with taking a sip of the wine glass in his hand as he looked around the ballroom. Against his will, Dream found himself drawn to him.

He had the oddest sense that he had met the man before, though he was entirely unrecognizable.

"You're interested," Sapnap declared. "I can tell."

"No, you can't," Dream protested, already feeling flustered. "You're the worst."

"Don't look now, but he's coming your way," Sapnap said, and Dream scowled before realizing that Sapnap was right—the man had glanced in his direction. Dream, as the "prince" of the ball, with his emerald green mask, was so easily recognizable. He knew that, as the man was lost sight of for a few moments before emerging from a crowd of powder-covered ladies and gentlemen.

"Hello," he said politely. "You must be Dream."

Dream did his best to remain neutral and completely apathetic, the same way he had interacted with everyone else that night. He gave the man a customary glance, up and down, and then tried to make himself dismiss him, but for some odd reason his mouth wouldn't cooperate with what his brain was telling him.

"That's me," Dream said instead, and reached a hand out. The stranger shook it, and again, Dream had the oddest sense of *deja vu*.

"Are you from around here?"

"I'm from the Southern Isles," the man said. Dream could see his eyes through the elaborate, blue jeweled mask, and the slim cut of his suit only accented him more. Dream felt Sapnap give him a slight nudge at the small of his back.

"I don't suppose you'll tell me your name?"

"I feel like that would defeat the point of this entire ball."

"Dream loves dancing," Sapnap said casually, inserting himself into the conversation.

Dream, for sake of keeping his composure, didn't pinch Sapnap harshly, but instead promised

himself that he would get back at Sapnap once this whole deal was done with.

“Well, Dream,” the man said, and held out a hand, “Would you like to dance?”

Dream stared at him for a moment and, as cliché as it sounded, felt as if his breath was taken away.

“Okay,” Dream said, heart in his throat, and took the man’s hand.

Con conversationally, the man in the blue mask said, “It’s nice to get to know you.”

“You as well,” Dream said. “You said you’re from the South?”

“I have family there.”

They stood a few inches apart, and waited for the music to begin from the orchestra. Dream saw the violinist raise her bow to the instrument, signaling to the rest of the orchestra that they were beginning, and started playing a slow, quiet tune that was the perfect dance to talk along with. So Dream put his arms on the man’s shoulders, and his hands went on Dream’s waist, very careful and gentle, and they began moving in a slow, practiced dance.

“How is the South?” Dream ventured. “I’ve never been.”

“It’s fine,” he said. “It’s warmer than it is here, and it rains more often.”

“Never thought I would know of a place that rains more than the North,” Dream said quietly, and the man laughed. It was a peculiar kind of laugh— very kind, very warm, and somehow trusting—but Dream got the sense that it wasn’t how the man laughed at all.

“The weather isn’t the best, but it’s home.”

“I should probably visit at some point,” Dream said. “One day you could show me around.”

“Whenever you’re free,” he said, and Dream nodded.

There was an uncomfortable silence for a moment while Dream fought for something to say that wasn’t awful, surface-level conversation. No prompts came to mind, so instead Dream focused on his feet so that he was stepping in line with every one of the man’s moves. He was very sure of himself. Dream wasn’t sure whether he liked that or not.

“How are you doing tonight?” the man said, after a decent amount of time had passed with no words exchanged between the two of them. “I imagine it’s rather busy.”

“It is,” Dream said, grateful for something that wasn’t awkward silence. “At least I have my brother to help me pass the time.”

“Is he the one over there?”

“Yes,” Dream said, and risked a glance over at Sapnap, who smiled and gave Dream a thumbs-up. “His name is Sapnap. He’s a year younger than me.”

“He seems nice.”

Dream smiled reluctantly. “Somewhat. He can be a bit of an asshole sometimes.” Then his brain caught up with his mouth, and Dream winced. It had been repeated to him many times that princes shouldn’t swear, but his two best friends were terrible influences on him. “Ignore my language. I’m supposed to be polite here.”

It was hard to read facial expressions from under the mask, but Dream still thought that the man didn't care that much about whether Dream swore or not.

"It's alright," he said, "Being polite is suffocating."

"Tell me about it," Dream sighed, "Turning down a dozen suitors in a row is an exhausting ordeal."

"Not interested in anyone here?"

"Not to make you feel bad," Dream said apologetically, "But no one here is very interesting at all."

To his credit, the man smiled slightly. "That's fair. I understand that."

"That isn't a slight towards you."

"I didn't take it as one."

"Good," Dream said. "There are quite few people who would be as kind as you are."

He shrugged, changed his footing a little, and then as the tempo changed, to something higher and faster with much more energy to it, took a polite step backwards.

"Do you want to keep dancing?"

Dream looked at the girls on the sidelines, hoping and eagerly waiting for someone to ask them to dance. More than a few looked at him. He did his best to ignore their stares.

He hadn't asked for this. But he had been given it anyway.

"I'm good for now," Dream said truthfully, and turned away. He wasn't sure whether he wanted the man to follow him or not, but only a few steps told him the truth.

"Well?" Dream said, and beckoned with two fingers. "Are you coming or not?"

"It was wonderful to meet you," he said, "But I'd best be on my way now."

"Is it that late?"

The man checked his pocket watch, then up at the massive, golden clock on the wall. "For me, yes."

"Will you be here tomorrow?" Dream blurted, before the man could turn fully away.

He paused in his step. "If you would like me to, yes."

Dream said nothing further, already embarrassed at how much emotion he had shown, and bid the stranger adieu. He returned to Sappnap slightly breathless, slightly flustered, and more than a little irritated at the knowing smirk Sappnap gave him.

"So," Sappnap said, "Was he interesting?"

"Shut up," Dream muttered, and tried to focus only on the spinning, twirling mass of colors in front of him rather than the phantom touch on his waist from the man who had already vanished.

He looked at the clock and saw that it was barely past midnight; the bells hadn't even finished

chiming yet.

“I wonder why he had to leave,” Dream said. “It’s only midnight.”

“Maybe he gets tired early.”

“Maybe,” Dream said thoughtfully, and looked at the clock again. The bell tower had finished chiming, and there was no hint of the man in the blue mask anywhere. “Maybe so.”

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“And then he said, *you’re unbearable*. Out of all people!”

George shook his head sympathetically. “Sapnap is the worst.”

“He’s the unbearable one, not me,” Dream complained. “He won’t leave me alone about this.”

“On the bright side,” George said placatingly, “One night down. There’s only two left to go.”

“But it never really works like that,” Dream said bitterly. “There might only be two nights left, but I’ve got to pick someone by the end of those two. And it’ll never end, not really. Not for me.”

George took the next stack of dirtied dishes into the kitchen, and Dream followed him. The water in the sink switched on and George plunged the first of the dishes into warm, soapy water. Dream hopped up onto the counter, legs swinging, and put his head in his hands.

“It’s so useless,” he said. “I know that there’s no one in there who I’ll ever truly care about.”

“It’s a difficult life, isn’t it?”

Dream huffed a small laugh. “I know it sounds ridiculous to be complaining about it, but I’m just so tired of everything. Of all these expectations and ideals that people are wanting from me. I’m only eighteen.”

“But you keep saying that this marriage is only for formalities,” George said, and busied himself with soaping a plate with a stubborn stain. “So in the end, you’ll still be you.”

“But it’s not the same.”

George nodded. “I know.” Then, with a small smile, “At least you’ll always have me, right?”

Dream cracked a smile as well. “I wish you could come with me to the next masquerade ball. Wouldn’t that be wonderful?”

George waved a hand dismissively, stacked a clean plate onto the counter, and reached for the next one. “You have Sapnap already.”

“Sapnap only bothers me more,” Dream muttered. “He’s always pointing out all the people I should be talking to, all the people I should be dancing with, everything.”

“At least he’s making it more fun,” George said. “It’s better than being there alone.”

Dream shuddered at the thought of having to deal with the rest of the two masquerade nights alone,

without anyone by his side. "I would go mad."

"There's only two more nights," George soothed. "You can get through this. Plus, I'll always be here."

"You'll always be *here*," Dream agreed, "But no one interesting will be *there*."

"That's a shame," George said innocuously. "Are you sure there's no one you wouldn't even want to see twice?"

Unwillingly, Dream's thoughts flashed slightly to the man in the blue mask, eyes shining bright and curious, the way his voice had been so lightly accented, just like George's was, smooth and calming.

"No one," Dream said decisively. "I'd be happy if I never had to attend another masquerade ball again."

"I hope you won't." Then George mumbled, "I hate seeing you unhappy."

Dream barely heard him; a thought had struck him suddenly. "What if, instead of trying to find a suitor, some person I barely know and don't care about, I married you?"

George laughed. "That's ridiculous."

"I know," Dream said. "Imagine if we got married."

Thoughtfully, George said, "How bad would it be, right?"

"Hm?"

Ears red, George kept his head down and said, "Marrying me."

"You're my best friend," Dream said. "It's worth a thought, I guess."

"Yeah," George echoed, and then seemed to shake himself back into the present. "I guess."

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The moon had risen full and high into the sky before Dream recognized the familiar figure of the man with the blue mask entering quietly through the front doors. He was just as cool and collected as before, and this time, it only took him a few moments before finding Dream, sitting at the same table as before with Sapnap at his side.

"Hello," Dream said when he approached, "You again."

"Me again," he agreed. "I'm here to ask you to dance."

"Dream would love to," Sapnap said, before Dream even had a chance to open his mouth to respond.

The man glanced from Dream to Sapnap, and when Dream didn't protest, offered a hand to him. Dream took it.

The man guided him through the crowd, and through virtue of being next to Dream, being masked and mysterious, or simply by having a commanding presence, the very crowd seemed to part for him.

Their conversation was just as boring as the night before, and Dream felt his fingers itching at his side, aching for something to happen. Small talk could only go so far.

Finally, in between songs, Dream found his chance.

“Do you want to leave?” he asked, a bit breathlessly. “It’s very... stuffy in here.”

“By all means,” the man said, and gestured to the front doors. Dream looked at them and grimaced; he technically shouldn’t be seen leaving the ballroom. So instead, Dream grabbed the man’s suit sleeve and directed him towards a large ornamental vase, behind which was a staff door that led to the gardens. No one would see them departing through there.

“It’s quieter out here,” Dream said, exiting into the moonlight.

“It’s nice,” the man agreed. He seemed much quieter, too, now that it was just the two of them alone rather than surrounded by a hundred other people. “Where did you want to take me?”

Dream hadn’t exactly decided that yet. “Anywhere, really.”

“There’s the labyrinth,” the man said, and gestured to the tall, neatly trimmed hedges that glowed dusty green in the daylight, and were silvery underneath the moon. “If you want to take a walk.”

“It’s better than being indoors,” Dream said, and led the man towards the entrance of the labyrinth.

“Much cooler, too.”

Gravel crunched under their shoes as the hedges enveloped them; for a while, the only sound was crickets chirping in the background.

After a moment, Dream said, “Tell me about yourself.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Anything,” Dream said. “Your favorite color, your favorite music, whether you have siblings or not.”

“Well, I can’t give away everything,” the man said amusedly, “But I can tell you the basics.”

The conversation started off quietly, polite and shallow, and before Dream knew it, their words had shifted to childhood friends and dreams, and Dream ended up nearly talking himself hoarse about George and Sapnap, about his childhood tutors and the man recounted having to learn mathematics and despising it, which Dream wholeheartedly agreed with.

Dream, who had long forgotten which way exited the maze and which way entered it, found himself simply walking where the other man led him. But he noticed after a while that the man’s turns were decisive, almost planned, as if—

“It’s funny,” Dream said, before he could stop himself. “It’s like you’ve been here before.”

The man paused momentarily. “Really?”



“Yes,” Dream said. “I feel like you know every part of this maze.”

Almost cautiously, as if testing out the words, “I’m good with directions, I suppose.”

“I’m glad that you are, then,” Dream said. “I’m surely lost.”

“I think I could find us the way out, if you wanted.”

Dream looked up at the sky, the spattering of stars that were half blocked out by the towering castle above him, and painfully had to acknowledge that he had been gone from the masquerade for too long.

“I do need to get back,” Dream said apologetically, and without another word, the man in the blue mask led him on a clear, steady line towards the exit. They emerged into the open gardens, and Dream saw the golden light from the chandeliers spilling out into the darkness.

Dream turned to pull him along with him, for Dream would need some sort of support once he went back indoors, but the man hesitated.

“I’ve got to go,” he said, “It’s nearly midnight.”

“The ball goes until nearly two,” Dream said, and resisted the urge to reach and tug him back, “You left early yesterday, we have time.”

He hadn’t meant to say *we*. It had slipped out regardless.

“I’ll be here for the third day,” the man said, “If you’d care to dance again.”

His motions were slightly more urgent, slightly more rushed than the languid, cool motions from early. It made Dream tilt his head curiously. He wanted to know more about the man in blue—he wanted to peel back the secrets and the mysteries, to find out what truly made the man tick underneath everything. Dream wanted to know his real name. Was that too much to ask?

“Why are you leaving so early?”

Distantly, Dream heard the chiming of the bell tower, the first of twelve bells to ring. Still nearly two hours until the masquerade ball was finished. That was two more painful hours of socializing with people Dream couldn’t care less about, with only Sapnap at his side to placate him. He would be forced to interact with, potentially dance, with other people, and Dream had no intention of doing that when he could be sitting quietly in the garden with someone genuinely interesting at his side.

“I’ve just got to go home,” the man said hurriedly. “But I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Dream looked at him for a moment.

“If you’re sure.”

“I am.”

“Tomorrow, then,” Dream said, already looking forward to it.

The man turned, and moved quickly down the main steps of the palace, and Dream watched him go, wishing that he could pull him back.

There was a carriage waiting for him at the foot of the stairs, and Dream watched as the man

entered it, as the final chime rang out.

As the carriage turned, pulling away in the darkness, something fluttered out into the darkness,

There, on the first step of the palace, was an elegantly carved blue mask, studded with the smallest of sapphires and diamonds that glimmered in the moonlight. It was weighty in his hand, clearly something of rich wealth and prosperity. Slowly, Dream held it up in front of him and imagined that someone else was wearing it, someone who was wonderful at dancing, with a light touch, a gentle sense of humor, and someone who was just interesting enough that Dream wanted to have another night with them.

Why had they left behind their mask?

Dream rubbed a thumb over the smooth satin ribbons that would have tied around the back of the man's head. They were silky under his touch, waving gently in the nighttime wind.

He would give it back to the man when Dream saw him tomorrow, Dream thought determinedly. It might be slightly difficult for Dream to find him out— after all, he had been recognizing the same people by the feathered, bejeweled masks that they wore for two nights in a row— but hopefully he would approach Dream first.

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“I think you should come with me,” Dream said, as George finished ironing flat the elegant suit that Dream was supposed to be wearing that night.

“Hm.” George carefully flattened a wrinkle and ran the hot iron over it again. “You think?”

“Yes,” Dream said. “You and Sapnap can help me get through all of it.”

“I’m not much of a dress up person.”

“I know,” Dream sighed, “But you could wear one of my old suits, and you could help make things more bearable for me. Besides, I’m the prince. No one can complain if I bring you along. At least not to me they can’t.”

George bent more firmly over Dream’s suit and seemed to be very preoccupied with making sure that every corner of it was perfect. He didn’t respond to Dream’s words for a while, and just as Dream was about to ask him again to see if he heard, answered.

“Are you sure you won’t be preoccupied with anyone else?”

His voice was slightly high. Dream looked curiously at him for a moment.

“Are you okay?”

“What?” He set the hot iron to the side. “Of course I’m okay.”

“You’re acting weird.”

George raised an eyebrow. “This is how I always act.”

Dream looked at him, feeling confused and somewhat worried, for although George was in theory

just one of the palace staff, he was also one of Dream's best friends, and Dream had known him for long enough to know when George was lying about something.

Still it was obvious that George was uncomfortable. Perhaps Dream had been pressing too hard about coming to the masquerade ball? It made sense, after all. George was rarely open with newcomers, only loud and vivacious with Dream and Sapnap around. A ballroom filled with hundreds of glossy, freshly minted socialites may be too much for one to handle.

"If you don't want to come, it's okay."

George hummed, then removed Dream's suit from the ironing bench to hold up and examine. "Are there any wrinkles that you see?"

"It looks fine," Dream said impatiently. "Why are you trying to change the subject?"

"I'm not one for parties," George said, for now that Dream had cornered him into speaking about it, it was rather difficult to avoid. "And I'm sure that there are people there who deserve your time more than you."

"I doubt it," Dream said, but didn't push the point further. He still had two hours before he was expected to be ready for the masquerade, and in that time he could still speak with George.

"I'd go if you really wanted me there."

"I don't want to make you go anywhere you're not comfortable."

"It's not that, it's just..." George fixed his gaze on the polished, bronze cufflinks of Dream's suit and refused to stray. "I don't know. Maybe I will go."

"Really?"

"Yes," George said firmly, and appeared to steel himself, "I'll go with you."

Dream smiled broadly. Maybe he would have the chance to introduce the man in the blue mask to George as well as Sapnap— after all, he valued their opinions more than anyone else's in the world. "It'll be fun. I promise it."

"But I'm sticking with you and Sapnap," George continued. "I doubt that your parents and the other... royalty want me there with you."

"It doesn't matter," Dream said imperiously, and waved a hand, "You're with me, and that's what counts."

"I don't have an outfit."

"You can wear one of Sapnap's. You're about the same size, aren't you?"

"I don't have a mask, either."

Dream's thoughts strayed to the sapphire mask, in his bedside drawer, that belonged to someone else. He would have the opportunity to give it back to the man when he saw him later that night.

"I'm sure someone around here has a spare that they can give to you."

"Wonderful," George said faintly. "I'm sure tonight will be wonderful."

Dream grinned. “Chin up, Georgie. It’ll be amazing.”

In response, George tossed a pincushion at Dream’s head, and Dream laughed and ducked to avoid it. Despite the exhaustion that the first two nights had put him through, Dream was tentatively hopeful about finding a suitor. With George and Sapnap at his side, things couldn’t go wrong. Nothing ever went wrong when it was the three of them.

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Two hours in. Dream looked at the clock, back at the ballroom, back at the clock again.

“He’s not here,” Dream said, and tried to swallow around the lump of disappointment in his throat.

“Who?”

Dream looked at the crowd again, looked back at the ground, and wished that he could have his own masquerade mask to cover up any sign of emotion that was on his face. “Someone from the last two nights.”

“I thought you said there was no one interesting.”

“Maybe I lied.”

“Sapnap,” George accused, “Have you been keeping secrets from me?”

Sapnap grinned, pushed George playfully. “Absolutely not. Although I *may* have omitted a few details.”

“You didn’t tell me that Dream was in *love*.” George dragged out the vowels, and nudged Dream’s shoulder. “He has a crush.”

“I do not,” Dream muttered, and tried not to feel disappointed about the disappearance of the man with the blue mask.

“He absolutely does,” Dream heard Sapnap whisper to George behind his back, “He just hasn’t gotten around to admitting it yet.”

“It doesn’t matter, even if I do,” Dream said. “I don’t think he’s showing tonight.”

Sapnap looked somewhat awkward, and so did George— his knee began bouncing, a sure sign that George was uncomfortable.

“Are you upset?” George asked quietly.

Dream crossed his arms, fixed his gaze on the red, velvet drapes on the opposite end of the room, and tried to reconcile what he was feeling with the situation around him.

“I don’t know,” he said truthfully, and caught Sapnap’s raised eyebrow. “Oh, don’t give me that look, Sapnap.”

“I’m not giving you any look,” Sapnap argued. “I just think it’s nice that after all this complaining, you actually found someone interesting to be with.”

“What’s his name?”

“He didn’t give it,” Dream admitted. “Makes sense. It’s a masquerade.”

“What does he look like?” George asked hesitantly.

“He was wearing a *mask*,” Dream said pointedly, “But probably around the same height as you, I guess. He had a blue mask, if that helps.”

“Didn’t he leave it behind yesterday?”

“Yes,” Dream said; he had it with him. He took it out from his pocket; Dream had looked at it for an embarrassingly long time, looking at the careful stitching on the side, the small, petite feathers along the sides, the deep glow of the jewels around the edges. “I think I would recognize him, though, even if he did have a different mask.”

“Huh,” George said.

He didn’t elaborate.

Dream looked curiously at him, wanting to know what he had said to make that expression appear on George’s face. “Are you okay?”

“I’m going to get a breath of fresh air,” George said in response, and darted quickly around people as he made his way to the exit.

Dream frowned at Sapnap. “Is he okay?”

Sapnap shrugged; he looked just as lost. “I’m not sure. I can go talk to him.”

“No, I can do it,” Dream said, and pushed himself up out of the chair before Sapnap could say otherwise. He followed where George had left, through one of the staff doors that George knew very well, as one of the palace staff himself.

He emerged behind the kitchens, and saw George’s form standing, turned away from the door. He had his arms wrapped around himself, and Dream rushed towards him.

“George,” Dream called. “Are you okay?”

“It’s me,” George burst out.

Dream stared.

“What?”

“It’s me,” George said, and his hands were trembling slightly at his side. “That’s my mask.”

Dream looked down at the mask in his hands. Something surged in his chest. There was the distinct feeling of a puzzle piece slotting into place.

“You’re lying,” Dream said.

“No, I’m not.” George looked close to tears. “The first night we danced and talked about how it rains more in the South, which I don’t even know is true, I just came up with that on the spot. And the second night we walked through the hedge maze together and we talked about palace life, and you told me about how you and I have been friends since we were little, and then you—”

"It's you," Dream breathed, cutting George off, and felt his heart rate pick up, skittering along with his breaths. "It's you?"

"Me," George said, the words tinged with forlornness.

"This is yours."

George nodded. Dream looked down at the mask in his hands, which had taken on an entirely different meaning.

"But why?" Dream asked, heart in his throat. "Why did you lie?"

"I thought..." George twisted his fingers by his stomach as he evidently searched for the right words to say, "I thought that if I were me, I wouldn't be enough. That I had to be someone fancier, someone more impressive, someone more interesting."

"You've always been enough for me," Dream said numbly, and tried to understand everything that had happened in the last ten minutes.

"I'm sorry for deceiving you," George said in a rush. "I am, I really am, and I don't want to mess things up with us, and if I had known, I would have—"

Dream wrapped his arms around George's neck and pulled him in for a hug, and clung onto his best friend as all the stress and worry from the last few days flooded out of him. He could feel the tension in George's shoulders leach away as well, until the two were folded into each other like perfect, small playing cards.

"I can't believe you didn't *tell* me," Dream said. "I would have said yes."

George looked at him, eyes round. "Really?"

"Of course," Dream said, almost laughing, because the reality of it was so apparent, "I would choose you over everyone else in a heartbeat. Without even having to think about it."

"Good," George breathed. "I would choose you too."

Dream found that he was smiling, and unable to stop. "You're ridiculous."

"Thank you," George muttered, cheeks red, "I try."

"So—" Dream fumbled for words. "How did you get this? And how did I not recognize you? Did you want—I mean, were you trying to—all along?"

"It's kind of a long story," George said, and at once he looked more happy than Dream had seen him in weeks. Gone was the cool facade of the man in the blue mask, and gone was George's quiet, anxious attitude. Somehow, a mix of the two had appeared, leaving George confident and attractive, with the same sharp, witty sense of humor that never failed to make Dream smile.

"Tell me about it," Dream breathed, and realized that all he wanted was to be at George's side, regardless of when or how.

Carefully, George said, "Do you believe in magic?"

Dream wasn't sure whether he did or not, but nodded regardless.

"I'll tell you everything, then," George said, and began talking.

They were talking long after the clock struck midnight, long after the moon rose and fell in the sky, and long after dawn arrived, in shades of yellow and pink and orange.

## End Notes

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